



I have read many articles, and have followed the sustainable golf theory with great interest. But, not necessarily, implementing this theory to our own maintenance practices. I have also recently followed the Greg Evans scenario closely and definitely won't be implementing any of his theory.

I have heard many comments around the south west counties from greenkeepers that are intrigued by his bold statements. They are all interested in the Greg Evans School of Greenkeeping. He has definitely stimulated discussion, and I commend him for this.

In addition, I would never be one for stopping anyone knocking leading bodies and organisations. They need it sometime, a bit like the government who think they are doing you a favour by

representing us and being complacent in their so called superior positions.

I hope, through this article, to offer a little support to the majority of good greenkeepers who do a great job with limited resources. Change is great in any situation, but it's got to achieve the long term objective.

#### **What is sustainable golf?**

The first area that any golf club should approach via 'sustainability' is their financial status. UK golf has always been sustainable, and always will be in the commercial world. This is mainly down to the minimal resources and management carried out on them.

An average 18 hole course in this country will be staffed with four to six greenkeepers, with an operating budget of between £120k to £150k, including wages, if they are lucky.

I operate a 27 hole golf resort, The Dartmouth Golf and Country Club, where our customers expectations are very high. After all, they have just forked out £70 to £80 for a one night golf break to include B&B, evening meal and two rounds of golf. Not bad value, is it!

The course remains open all year round with main greens and tees playable throughout the year, perhaps with the exception of the odd day during the winter when it rains continuously. With over 42,000 rounds on the main championship course and 18,000 on the 9 hole course, our greenkeeping operating costs, including wages, currently stands at £197k. This provides a fairly sustainable golf course and business, although share holders do

want to see more profit, as in any business.

A private members club or a commercial business may well have different agendas, but both will want perfect playing conditions. There are not many golf courses being run with an open cheque book and a fulfilled greenkeeping wish list.

Although we are experiencing a downturn in golf, both in this country and around the world, it will be the majority of golf courses in the UK that will come out on top, because we have always utilised our minimal resources and labour available. So our product will not diminish too badly, even with reduced budgets.

Sustainable practices are a normal day to day operation on most courses run by professional and experienced course managers. Improved management skills and individual development has seen the monitoring of these practices being recognised and improved.

The course managers and head greenkeepers that I associate myself with do not mow their greens at 2mm, and they would really struggle to justify 200 tonnes of topdressing a year within their budgets, for the sake of it. And, then there's the massive inconvenience to play trying to get it down during the growing season. Is that when you should apply dressing, when the grass is growing?

We all question ourselves, on occasions, about whether we are doing the right thing, but these are the pressures of the job.

Greg mentioned that mowing was the

**Terry Farkin, Course Manager at Dartmouth Golf and Country Club, and golf course maintenance advisor, wants to see a more commonsense approach to greenkeeping and suggests that giving in to the golfers with big egos is not the way to go**

# COMMONSENSE GREENKEEPING Not so common?

most important practice. Setting a mower at 2mm will require a tournament blade and will probably last about a week mowing at 2mm on greens with 200 tonnes of sand per annum being applied to them. Sustainable! Not quite sure.

Greg and Ealing Golf Club must be very happy with each other and I hope they have a long and prosperous time together.

But, in my view, there is a better way of having good putting surfaces all year round that will keep the majority of your members happy. And not just the ones with big egos who want fast putting surfaces to justify their lack of ability to play on the best possible surface put in front of them by good, professional people trying to do their best with the limited resources provided to them.

I have been a greenkeeper for twenty-eight years and currently provide advice to three other courses in the UK. I do not dictate how these courses are managed, as they all have very competent head greenkeepers who understand their course and have a good vision on how they should be managed and presented.

They all work with limited resources, and all have greens that are playable all year round with minimal disturbance to the golfers that play on them. My role is to support and guide them, as necessary, and to help them make good business and agronomic decisions, set targets, and report back to the Company Directors.

This whole process is a good, sustainable approach to continually improve and maintain standards of

course presentation and turf condition throughout the year. A sustainable business, but where is our sustainability with the grass species that we are trying to encourage?

Apart from Dartmouth, the other courses I am involved in are The Lambourne Club in Buckinghamshire, Dummer Golf Club in Hampshire and Blackwater Valley Golf Centre in Surrey.

The biggest issue at these clubs, prior to my involvement, was the amount of thatch within the greens. On average the depth of thatch was between 35 to 40mm. The courses were not losing any play, but the performance of the greens was inconsistent. They were very much poa annua dominated but all did have a good foundation of a sandy rootzone - not a full USGA specification, but a good quality rootzone to work with.

With hard work and commitment from all the greenkeepers, along with some investment in aeration equipment, the courses now boast surfaces with thatch level as little as 10mm. The turf composition has transformed from 80 to 90% poa annua, to a good blend of poa and 30 to 40% bent.

I do not believe we are consciously thinking of the R&A ladder of sustainability, but all of the head greenkeepers make conscious efforts to promote fine grasses with good balanced feeding and watering programmes.

The poa/bent surfaces are performing well throughout the year with good customer feedback, and the surfaces are maintained, throughout the year, with minimal disturbance to play - a vital criteria to all the clubs, financially.

The key to the greens improvements has been thatch management and reduced nutrient input. If we continue with this commonsense approach to greenkeeping, I am sure we will continue to see the change in grass composition, even though this is not vital for any of the courses. What is important is good, consistent, smooth running surfaces, with a good ball roll of 8 to 9 ft - sufficient enough for any amateur golfer and preferred by the majority. And, of course, lower maintenance costs.

So, don't give in to the ones with the big egos who lack natural ability to play on surfaces put in front of them.

#### **Reduce costs - reduce labour**

These are the demands that we are all being asked to achieve. It's not easy continually reducing cost whilst maintaining high standards of turf quality and presentation.

This is the biggest challenge that greenkeepers will have to cope with over the next few years. Improving your management skills and training staff is the most sustainable way of seeing yourselves through this difficult period of economic decline.

So, this controversial approach ups the stakes by trying to reinvent the grass plant and increase costs and labour. Now make up your own mind!

About the author: Terry Farkins, Course Manger Dartmouth Golf and Country Club, Company Golf Course Maintenance Advisor, Internal Verifier and Assessor to the Duchy College Cornwall. Qualified to NVQ level 4 in Business Management. I.W.E.M. Environmental management certificate. Runner up in Toro Award for Excellence 2000. Finalist of the Toro Greenkeeper of the year award 1991.



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